

# Examining Transformation in Lepcha Culture and Language within Dzongu, Upper Sikkim: A Reflective Analysis

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## Abstract

The Lepcha tribe, the oldest and first reported in Sikkim, India, predominantly resides in Dzongu valley, officially designated as a reserve for the Lepcha community. Nestled alongside the Khangchendzonga Biosphere Reserve in the north district, Dzongu is renowned for preserving the rich cultural heritage of the Lepchas. Given the ongoing impact of globalization on cultural and economic dynamics, there is a pressing need to document the cultural diversity of the Lepcha community. Recent observations regarding the diminishing influence of the Lepcha language within the community highlight the necessity for a closer examination of the Lepcha speech community. This paper delves into the socio-political dimensions of Lepcha life and their implications for language and culture in Dzongu valley. By analyzing indicators of language maintenance and shift, this study aims to elucidate the direction in which the Lepcha speech community is heading, amidst changing socio-political landscapes.

**Keywords:** Lepcha Tribe, Dzongu valley, Ethno-linguistic vitality

## Introduction

The Lepchas, known as the earliest settlers to Sikkim are predominantly settled in Dzongu valley in North Sikkim.. The Lepcha term for their tribe, "Rong," carries meanings such as 'the son of god' or 'the son of snow,' with the word 'Lapche' possibly originating from Limbu influences. According to legend, the Lepchas trace their origins to Mayel Lyang, a mythical land near the foothills of Mount Kanchendzonga within Sikkim. Their language, Lepcha (also known as Rong), belongs to the Tibeto-Burman language sub-family within the Tibeto-Chinese language family, specifically classified within the non-pronominalised group of Himalayan languages (Foning, 1987).

The Lepchas, among the earliest settlers in Sikkim, are recognized as scheduled tribes in India, primarily residing in Sikkim and the Darjeeling/Kalimpong districts of West Bengal. Despite forming a minority, comprising around 10 percent of Sikkim's population (as per the 1991 census) and over 4 percent in the Darjeeling district (exact figures not yet updated), and the ethnic majority in these regions is often considered Nepali. Ethno-linguistic vitality, as outlined by Landweer, offers a framework to understand the probable trajectory of a speech community in terms of language maintenance or shift (Landweer, 2016).

Despite their rich heritage, the socio-cultural and economic landscape of the Lepchas has been undergoing significant changes in recent years, owing to advancements in technology and infrastructure, such as improved access to markets, healthcare, education, and transportation. Mr. Pawan Kumar Chamling, the leader of the Sikkim Democratic Front and the former chief minister of Sikkim, spearheaded the initiative to recognize the Lepchas as a primitive tribe. This proposal gained approval from the cabinet on January 29, 2005, officially acknowledging the Lepchas status as a primitive tribe.

Various indicators, including urban-rural distribution, language usage domains, population dynamics, social networks, community outlook and economic stability, are crucial in assessing the language shift or change in language pattern of the Lepcha community, especially in Dzongu valley (Landweer, 2016). Despite their relatively remote location and limited access to urban centers like Gangtok, the capital of Sikkim, Lepchas in Dzongu valley shows significant language shift, reflecting the complex interplay of socio-cultural factors.

Change is an inevitable and ongoing phenomenon in all societies, often leading to the transformation or even disappearance of traditional socio-cultural conditions that have evolved over generations within specific environmental contexts.

## **Language Usage and Societal Dynamics: Current Trends and Challenges**

### **Official Recognition and Educational Landscape**

Lepcha has been officially recognized as one of the languages in Sikkim, alongside Nepali, Hindi, and English. However, its use in official domains and education is diminishing, with English dominating legislative, judicial, and educational settings. Lepcha is primarily taught as a subject in the curriculum, focusing on literary aspects, but lacks inclusion in scientific and technological subjects.

### **Domain-based Language Usage**

An attitudinal study conducted in the Dzongu valley reveals that Lepcha is predominantly used within the family, particularly by the older generation. While it is occasionally utilized by the younger generation in interactions with relatives and neighbors, its use is limited in other domains such as the workplace, social gatherings, and friendships. In religious contexts, Lepcha is employed solely by the Bongthing, the leader of the traditional shamanistic religion, while Tibetan/Bhutia is preferred in Buddhist Gumphas (Religious place).

### **Societal Influences and Language Shift**

The dominance of Nepali language in socio-political spheres since the late 18th century has exerted immense pressure on Lepcha, despite its rich tradition. Inter-ethnic marriages, especially with the Nepali community, have become increasingly accepted, posing a significant threat to the preservation of the Lepcha language. The adoption of Hindi, promoted by central and state governments, has further contributed to the marginalization of Lepcha, particularly after Sikkim's merger in 1975. English is also gaining prominence among younger generations.

### **Challenges and Potential Language Loss**

While language mixing and switching, particularly with Nepali, are prevalent among Lepcha speakers,

scholars note that this does not necessarily indicate language loss but may reflect bilingual language use and contact-induced language change. However, if this trend continues unchecked and extends to the entire lexicon and grammar without sociolinguistic identification beyond the dominant use of the original language, it may ultimately lead to language loss. The complex interplay between embedded language forms and matrix language within conversations complicates objective determination of language shift or loss.

To understand the role of population and group dynamics in ethno-linguistic vitality within the Lepcha community, a comprehensive examination of their socio-political history in inhabited areas is crucial.

## **Historical Transformations and Societal Shifts: Impact on Lepcha Community**

### **Early Interactions and Influence of Lamaism**

Historical records suggest that significant interactions with the Lepchas began during the 13th or 14th century when individuals from Tibet's Kham region made contact. By around 1600 A.D., a branch of the Tibetan Minyang dynasty had migrated to Sikkim, establishing themselves as rulers and introducing Lamaism, coinciding with the development of the Lepcha script. Tibetan scriptures were translated into Lepcha to support the spread of Lamaistic Buddhism, with earlier Lepcha manuscripts reportedly destroyed in conversion efforts.

### **Influx of Bhutanese and Nepali**

The socio-political landscape shifted with the arrival of Bhutanese forces post-1700 and subsequent Nepalese invasion in 1788-89, leading to conflicts and destruction of Lepcha scriptures. Large-scale migrations, such as the influx of Nepalese in the 19th century, altered Sikkim's demographic makeup and introduced new cultural influences, leading to inter-ethnic marriages and the emergence of blended ethnic groups like the Denjongpa.

### **Impact of British Rule**

British rule brought missionary activities aimed at converting Lepchas to Christianity and promoting English education, alongside the dominance of Lamaism. This religious divide created tensions within the community. The expansion of the tea industry further marginalized the Lepchas, pushing them into remote areas and diminishing the importance of their language. Despite efforts by missionaries to preserve the Lepcha language, its status declined over time.

### **Transition to Democracy**

The departure of the British and Sikkim's integration into India brought significant changes, marking a shift in socio-political and socio-cultural dynamics for the Lepcha community.

### **Some Recommendations to preserve and promote Lepcha Culture**

- Encourage the formation of voluntary organizations among the Lepcha community to enhance their socio-cultural and economic well-being.
- Establish formal local institutions dedicated to preserving the rich culture and heritage of the Lepchas, ensuring their needs are met.

- Foster a sense of responsibility among every Lepcha individual for preserving their culture and identity.
- Organize various programs within schools, colleges, and society to promote the language and culture of the Lepcha community.
- Advocate for the formulation of laws and policies by the government to safeguard the rights and identity of the Lepchas.

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